

Thomas John Ley

Politician and Murderer

The National Library holds more than just books—Barry York discovers an urn containing the ashes of a convicted murderer and former Minister for Justice in New South Wales

Of all the weird and wonderful items held in the National Library's special collections, none could possibly match the urn containing the ashes of Thomas John Ley. The urn is part of the Ley Family Papers in the Manuscript Collection; however, in the interests of accuracy, I must point out that the ashes are only 'believed to be of Thomas Ley'.

Ley, who came to Australia from England, aged six, with his mother and three siblings in 1886, is described in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography (ADB)* as a 'politician and murderer'. He died back in England in July 1947—in the Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum. Most of his life was spent in Australia where, from 1917 to 1928, he enjoyed success in the New South Wales and federal political arenas. He was Minister for Justice in New South Wales from 1922 to 1925 and was elected to the federal seat of Barton in 1925. He was first a Nationalist, then a Progressive (the forerunner to the Country Party) and then a Nationalist again.

Not surprisingly, entire books have been written about Ley and his crimes. After all, it's not every day that a former Minister for Justice becomes a convicted murderer. Dan



Unknown photographer
Portrait of Hon. Thomas John Ley
(1880–1947)
MHR for Barton, NSW, 1925
photograph
Pictorial Collection

Morgan's 1979 book, *The Minister for Murder*, is the best, most biographically focused and readable. Edgar Lustgarten's *The Chalk Pit*

Murder was published in London in 1974 and works well as a case study of murder. The first books about Ley appeared in the year of his death and are rather heavy-going tracts, mostly comprising trial transcriptions. Two published in 1947 are: *The Trial of Ley and Smith*, by C.E. Bachhofer Roberts and the similarly titled *Trial of Thomas John Ley and Lawrence John Smith*, edited by F. Tennyson



'Ley Mothers Liquor Party's Nest Egg'
 Reproduced from *From Pledge to Betrayal: The Authentic Story of Ley's Liquor Protecting 1923 Amending Liquor Act, As Told in the Correspondence Between Hammond and Ley; Also, A Study in Trust: How Ley, Under the White Flag of Friendship, Played the Brewers' Game* by E.H.T.
 (Sydney: NSW Alliance, [1923]) (Sydney: The Worker Print)

Jesse. The case is also discussed in legal literature, such as John Rowland's *Unfit to Plead?: Four Studies in Criminal Responsibility* (1965).

One of Ley's political achievements was the introduction in New South Wales of proportional representation in 1919. He was a prominent advocate for the new system and the National Library has a copy of his booklet, *Pros and Cons of the Second Ballot, Preferential Voting and Proportional Representation*, published in 1918.

According to Baiba Berzins, in her ADB entry, Ley 'deluded many with his community work and pious utterances'. A teetotaler whose nickname was 'Lemonade Ley', he was accused by the Temperance movement of betraying their campaign for the prohibition of alcohol. Again, the National Library has a rare old publication about this facet of Ley's political career. In the 1920s they really knew how to labour a title and the 1923 brochure, written anonymously by 'E.H.T.', is called: *From Pledge to Betrayal: The Authentic Story of Ley's Liquor Protecting 1923 Amending Liquor Act, as Told in Correspondence Between Hammond and Ley; Also, A Study in Trust: How Ley, Under the White Flag of Friendship, Played the Brewers' Game*. Phew!

Ley didn't only play the brewers' game; he was capable of anything. Even murder.

Suspicions about him were first raised during the electoral campaign for the seat of Barton in 1925. Ley's Labour Party opponent, Fred McDonald, went public after Ley had tried to bribe him into withdrawing from the contest. Ley allegedly offered him shares worth £2000 in a Kings Cross property. The accusation didn't damage Ley too much as he won the election. But then McDonald appealed to the Court of Disputed Returns and soon thereafter, with the High Court about to inquire into his allegations, he disappeared in mysterious circumstances. The case lapsed for lack of evidence when McDonald failed to show up.

Even Ley's fellow-conservatives started to have doubts about him and, despite having been a State minister, he was never appointed to the federal ministry.

McDonald's disappearance could have been a coincidence but then, two years later, another of Ley's public critics, businessman Hyman Goldstein MLA, was found dead after apparently falling from 'Suicide Point' on the Coogee cliffs.

Keith Greedor, another of Ley's opponents and a one-time associate, was appointed by a group of concerned businessmen to investigate Ley. He also met a strange end when he was travelling to Newcastle by boat and fell overboard and drowned.

Ley was defeated at the 1928 elections and left Australia for

England with his mistress, Maggie Brook. Despite being married to Emily Louisa ('Lewie') Vernon, he had been having an affair with Brook for several years. Brook's husband was not a problem as he too had died in mysterious circumstances—though one can hardly accuse Ley of having arranged for a swarm of bees to kill somebody!

In addition to being around people who had a tendency to disappear mysteriously, Ley had also developed quite a reputation for dubious business dealings in Sydney—SOS Prickly Pear Poisons Ltd being one of the better known at the time—and his move to England enabled him to start afresh in such ventures. During World War II in England, he was arrested and convicted for black marketeering.

Justice caught up with him finally, not for any Australian activities but for his part in the murder in England of a barman, John McBain Mudie, who he believed was having an affair with Brook. Together with Lawrence John Smith, Ley was sentenced to death at the Old Bailey in March 1947. The case became known as 'the chalkpit murder' because Mudie's body was dumped in a Surrey chalkpit. Smith and Ley escaped the noose; Smith's sentence was commuted to life and Ley was declared insane and sent to Broadmoor.

The Ley Family Papers in the Library's Manuscript Collection include letters written by Ley to family members and a poem written to his wife, 'Lewie'. In a letter to one of his sons on 15 July 1947, Ley wrote: 'For your satisfaction, I should like you to know I never killed nor bribed anyone to kill Mudie.' But in his poem, 'Lewie, Angel Mine!', penned from his Broadmoor cell

Lewis, Angel Mine!

Lewis darling, first, last & only love,
 On Mount Rennie's bright and
 sunny slope,
 We met and filled with thrill
 and hope,
 In Bourke St found joys as
 Heaven above.

Poor, ignorant and then of no
 account,
 You still stopped & left old
 horse bus,
 To walk with me 'Spide Eddy's fuss,
 And always showed for me
 your stirring love:

J. Ley Broadmoor C.L. Asylum
 84
 15. VII. 1947

My dear Keith

For your satisfaction, I
 should like you to know I never
 killed nor bribed anyone to kill
 Studie. There is and was no evidence
 to warrant such a conclusion. The
 Chief Justice pre-judged, and showed
 he lacked the first essential of a
 judge, impartiality; and his sum-
 ming up was not truthful. I
 don't blame the jury but the judge.

When I'm free from
 this Asylum, I shall write about
 the law & judges here, as well
 as my case, that may be power-
 ful enough to bring reform
 badly needed

T P.T.O.



(above left) Handwritten poem to Ley's wife 'Lewie' dated 4 June 1947 from Broadmoor C.L. Asylum
 Ley Family Papers MS6149/1/8; Manuscript Collection

(above right) Letter to Keith, one of Ley's sons, dated 15 July 1947 from Broadmoor C.L. Asylum
 Ley Family Papers MS6149/1/8; Manuscript Collection

(left) Unknown photographer
 Portrait of Emily Louisa Stone Vernon Ley (1874-1956)
 photograph
 Ley Family Papers MS6149/7; Manuscript Collection

at 5.00 am on 4 June, 1947, he wrote: 'Conscious of my sad and sorry conduct; no-one shall our partnership break.'

The Ley collection in Manuscripts contains other rare and unusual materials, including a cloth election banner ('Progressive Candidate T. J. Ley will speak here'), campaign badges, invitation cards, address books and a leather wallet and metal cigarette box engraved with Ley's name and initials. It's an eerie



From an album of invitations, an invitation card from the Governor of New South Wales for a function attended by his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales dated 9 June 1920
Ley Family Papers MS6149/1;
Manuscript Collection

Cloth election banner with the words 'Progressive Candidate T.J. Ley will speak here' painted on fabric approx. 1 x 1.3 m
Ley Family Papers MS6149/1;
Manuscript Collection

sensation to touch and hold them, knowing the history of their owner.

Originally, the collection included film footage of Ley during the 1922 New South Wales election but this was transferred by the donor to ScreenSound (formerly the National Film and Sound Archive). The rest of the Ley collection is mainstream Manuscripts' records: legal and official documents, photo albums, letters and press cuttings. There is plenty of original material, including Thomas's instruments of appointment to various New South Wales Government posts, including his appointment as Minister for Justice. A 1922 Freemasons Lodge certificate points to Ley's sectarianism in political affairs. His Australian passport, dated 1924, is there—but so too is his British passport, dated 1946. There are also some business documents, relating to the failure of Prickly Pear Poisons Ltd and to his property investments in England during the war. A notable item is a tiny diary, maintained in prison in 1947, with entries in Pitman shorthand. There are news cuttings featuring reports about his trial and sentencing, petition for mercy and death and funeral.

There is also considerable material of other family members, such as Thomas's wife and members of her family, plus their sons Russell, Clive and Keith. Of 21 folders, nine are



Thomas's, two Lewie's and five contain materials of relevance to Keith. Three of Keith's files relate to the court case in England which resulted in his imprisonment for forgery. There are two boxes of family photographs, comprising seven albums, four bags and a folio.

It's a pity there is not more about Lewie, as she seems a remarkable woman. Born in England in 1874, she came to Australia with her parents in 1898, in which year she married Thomas Ley. A note in the Manuscript Collection descriptive list says that she was 'involved in the international suffrage movement'. She followed Ley to England in 1942 but returned to Australia after his death. She died at Bowral in 1956. She liked to write and among her two folders is an exercise book containing drafts of

short stories and a press cutting of one that was published in 1892.

Up to a point, Thomas Ley's life is encapsulated in the eight boxes comprising the collection. The collection—like the life—is completed with the inclusion of the official certificate of cremation, dated 29 July 1947.

A final note. The Ley Family Papers have a mysterious aspect. In 1984 a Wollongong man found them with the aforementioned urn in his backyard shed. They had lain there, hidden, for about 30 years.

BARRY YORK is an historian and writer. His email address is: garocon@pcug.org.au